

Exporting “people of British stock”: training and emigration policy in inter- war Britain

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Like the adult education movement, the historiography of adult education has had its ups and downs. At present, adult education historians probably feel they are facing more than their share of bad hair days. One reason for this may perhaps be the focus of much historical research in our field, which tends to dwell on organisations and movements that are themselves faltering or disappearing. Considerable attention is still paid to the history of adult education ties with popular struggles for citizenship and social justice. Yet the wider field of study itself is moving in other directions: part looks to the wide fields of theory, often of various post-structural varieties; another, and rapidly growing part, is more concerned with cultivating pedagogic practices, frequently linked to employability and professional development.

This paper is concerned with the role that adult education and training played in British emigration policies between the wars. Others have examined migrant training programmes for young people, who are also the main focus of recent debates about abuse (Hamilton and Higman 2003; Schell 1995). Programmes for adults, directed in practice towards the long term unemployed, attract considerably less attention.

The development of British emigration policy

Before 1914, British governments took little direct interest in emigration policy. While central government had co-sponsored an inquiry into land settlement in the colonies, its report was publicised mainly by its author, the novelist and social imperialist Henry Rider Haggard (Rider Haggard 1905, v). National government largely left the field to a combination of market forces and philanthropy. While this was supplemented from the late 1880s by local government, mainly under the poor laws, until 1914 the field was dominated by the voluntary sector. The major players were faith organisations, including the Salvation Army.

After the First World War, new policy considerations pushed government into the field. First, unemployment reached one million in 1920, and did not fall below that level until the second year of World War Two. Emigration policies therefore aimed at reducing the number of unproductive and dependent citizens at home, adopting a range of inducements to encourage unemployed people and unwanted children to emigrate.

Second, British and Dominions governments had a shared and publicly stated interest in strengthening their common racial and national bonds. Whatever its merits before 1914, the Great War had reinforced the global strategic value of the Empire for British policy-makers. After 1918, both the British and the Dominions governments also saw closer ethnic-national ties as helping to promote economic stability within the Imperial trading block. As Lord Milner told the Imperial Conference in 1921, the challenge was that “of distributing the white population of the Empire in the manner most conducive to the development, stability and strength of the whole” (quoted in Hill and Lubin 1934, 115).

After the War, the Government set up an Oversea Settlement Department (OSD) within the Dominions Office, transforming the ESC into the Oversea Settlement

Committee (OSC). Its initial role was to help facilitate emigration by British ex-servicemen and -women to the Dominions. But in 1920, faced with rising unemployment, the British government invited its counterparts in Canada, Australia and New Zealand to a conference on empire settlement. The conference, held early in 1921, drew up proposals for a scheme of selective assisted passages from Britain combined with systematic land settlement policies in the Dominions.

Dominions governments were equally clear about what they wanted from the scheme: skilled white citizens who could contribute to economic and political development, without diluting their predominantly British culture and allegiances. Two Dominions governments particularly shared the British perspective. Canada and Australia both emphasised land settlement by British immigrants; Canada discouraged and Australia prohibited non-European immigration (Langfield 2004, 87). Both also preferred immigrants who brought sufficient skills and capital to become independent if male, or able to serve as wives or domestic servants if women.

The Empire Settlement Act 1922 allowed the British Government to help migration through assisted passages, initial allowances, and training. It assumed that there would be a financial contribution from the Dominions Governments, though in practice, the latter confined their support to single men or families going to land work, single women going to domestic service, and individuals nominated by a recognised agency in the country concerned.

Developing adult training

Before 1914, a plethora of voluntary organisations provided emigrant training. Faith organisations like the Salvation Army and Christian Union for Social Service ran labour colonies to train men for work on the land overseas, while the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society sent boys and girls from its training farm in Staffordshire. Dr Barnardo's was the largest private initiative, but there were many others. The printer Walter Hazell founded two farm colonies, working with the Self-Help Emigration Society to send unemployed Londoners to Australia and Canada, while a group of Glasgow merchants and professionals established the Scottish Labour Colony Association with the aim of rescuing that city's poor and inebriate for the colonies. Local government labour colonies, particularly after 1905, also often encouraged trainees to emigrate, as a way of relieving congested urban labour markets.

The Empire Settlement Act entrenched the role of the voluntary bodies in emigration policy. The Salvation Army was quick to secure subsidies under the Act, providing training for lads and young men at its Hadleigh farm colony, and at its training farm near Brisbane. So was the Church of Scotland, which trained emigrants at its farm colony at Cornton Vale. Private voluntary initiatives also flourished: in Paisley, Dr George Cossar bought a small estate at Craighielinn, where he trained lads in basic market gardening and farming before sending them to Canada¹.

Government became involved directly three years after the Act was passed. In November 1925, a group of men jumped off a lorry and walked into Barham House, in the Suffolk village of Claydon. All were young, single and unemployed, and the majority had travelled by train from coalmining areas. They were among 200 recruits to a new six month training course in basic farming techniques, before sailing on an assisted passage to Canada or Australia.

T.W. Ledger, a young unemployed miner from Walkley, in Sheffield, was one of the first to attend Claydon. Ledger was enthusiastic: "I have nothing but praise for the course, and the surroundings are first-rate", he told his local newspaper. He had put on eleven pounds in weight, describing the food as "very good". He had also had some "jolly evenings" listening to music, either live at the piano or on the radio or gramophone. He thought the experience "a fine thing for any young fellow"².

According to the Ministry of Labour, "a large number of young men" had been registering at its local labour exchanges for so long that they had "never acquired the habits and discipline which come from regular work"³. It therefore collaborated with the Dominions governments and the OSC to determine the curriculum, which largely consisted of supervised labour on heavy farm work. Barham House was the first Instructional Centre opened under this new scheme; early in 1926, it was followed by a second centre, at Weeting Hall, in Brandon.

What prompted government intervention? The Ministry of Labour's public stance was that this was simply a logical step to take in the face of long term unemployment. Further, in 1924 Britain's voters had elected their first Labour government. A number of leading Labour politicians had expressed misgivings about British emigration policy; Margaret Bondfield, for example, had visited Canada as part of a delegation examining child migrant conditions (Plant 1951, 131). For Labour, training was part of a broader interventionist strategy in the labour market, helping to raise the status of British migrants and potentially improving their conditions on arrival. The decision was no doubt helped by the willingness of the Canadian authorities to help fund the testing and training of potential migrants.

There were also important internal factors. The Ministry of Labour was a new and dynamic government department, and it rapidly learned to punch above its weight within Whitehall. As well as recruiting a number of extremely able and ambitious civil servants, the Ministry also benefited from its extensive network of local officers based in labour exchanges across the country. Having created a Training Department during the Great War, it found itself delivering training programmes for unemployed and disabled ex-servicemen in the early years of the peace. It had initially purchased Barham House, a disused eighteenth century workhouse, to deliver skills training programmes for veterans⁴. Once the supply of veterans had dried up, the Ministry had to decide whether to sacrifice unwanted capacity to the demands of the Treasury, or use it to extend its reach and influence.

The conclusion was easy. The Ministry described the centres as "experiments", reporting their activities under the heading of "Temporary functions arising out of

the War”⁵. The tactic of describing any novelty as an ‘experiment’ was one that the Ministry’s training department used on a number of occasions, usually successfully. By the late 1920s, the centres were established, and the Ministry successfully presented a case for their expansion. It was helped by a growing policy consensus around the question of labour mobility. Since the nineteenth century, British policy thinking on labour has emphasised the supply side. With rising unemployment during the 1920s, policy makers attacked the failure of the unemployed to leave their home area and seek jobs elsewhere.

Supply side thinking was expressed most forcibly in the 1928 report of the Industrial Transference Board (ITB). The ITB estimated that the distressed areas had a permanently surplus workforce of around 200,000 people, who should be encouraged to migrate in search of work. It vigorously denounced public relief works, stating that “nothing should be done which might tend to anchor men to their home district by holding out an illusory prospect of employment”⁶.

While the Board hoped that most would move within the UK, it saw emigration to the Dominions as an important additional outlet. Its report claimed that “No question is so fateful for the destiny of the British Commonwealth of Nations as a proper distribution of the people of British stock throughout its territories”. It then professed considerable surprise at finding “so small a flow of migration from this country to the Dominions”, at a time when migration from foreign (that is, non-British) countries had increased⁷.

Supported by the report, training programmes expanded rapidly (see Table). In early 1928, the Ministry of Labour opened two tented centres in Norfolk, mainly to test and prepare unemployed miners willing to work on that summer’s Canadian harvest. Later in the year, with Canadian support, it opened four new instructional centres: one at Carstairs in Scotland, and three in Norfolk. It also arranged to train 200 men (including some families) at the Army’s vocational training centre near Swindon. Finally, it opened five new hutted ‘testing centres’ on or near Forestry Commission land, aiming to send emigrants to Canada who had not yet been trained in farm work, but “had been put through a practical test of their general suitability for open-air life on the land oversea”⁸.

The Ministry had opened its first residential training centre for women while the ITB was still sitting. In 1927, in partnership with the Australian government, the Ministry took over the Elms, a large dwelling in Market Harborough. Co-funded by the Australian government, which was desperate to recruit white British women, the centre could train up to forty young single unemployed women at a time in domestic skills. A second centre for women was opened at Lenzie, near Paisley, in 1929, followed by a third centre at Leamington Spa.

As in the men’s centres, recruits had to give an undertaking to emigrate on completing the course; while the men had to agree to enter farm work as a condition of free transport to the Dominions, the women had to agree to enter domestic service. This condition was enforced by the Central Committee on Women’s Training

and Employment, an arm's length body reporting to the Ministry of Labour, whose focus, while influenced by feminist thinking on women's employment, was in practice narrowly centred on training for domestic service or 'home-making'.

Much of the voluntary sector meanwhile stagnated. The Salvation Army approached the government in 1928 with a detailed plan for settling families in Australia. The Army was already sending single men, lads and young women out to the United States and the Dominions, and it planned to build on its considerable experience of training men its land colony at Hadleigh, but it told the government that it was unable to take this new initiative further without significant grant aid⁹. The Ministry decided not to grant aid Hadleigh.

Though the Ministry blocked further support to the Salvation Army, it was still keen to keep faith groups on side. Following complaints from the Catholic Emigration Society (CES) about discrimination against its nominees by some local exchange officials, Noel Barlow, principal assistant secretary in charge of the training department, decided that the Ministry should "treat these men specially", and men nominated by the Society duly made their way to Claydon and Brandon¹⁰. In a matter of weeks, the Ministry had provided publicity for CES, contacted the Australian authorities about the arrangement, and developed a procedure for processing applications, all of which had to be marked clearly as coming from the CES – who, in the meantime, had simultaneously been negotiating with the OSD to open a dedicated training centre in North Wales¹¹.

In 1927, the Hudson's Bay Company approached OSD with a proposal for a labour colony on a 250 acre farm at Brogborough, in Bedfordshire, where it planned to train 100 men, aged 16-35, for periods of 4 – 10 weeks¹². OSD was willing to meet half of the operating costs, but was anxious to know from the Ministry of Labour whether it was likely to run on a comparable standard to Claydon. Though the training department duly reported itself unimpressed, the OSD continued its support¹³.

The Australian government suspend assisted immigration for single men in 1929. Although the Canadians had planned to recruit 3,000 harvesters, they ultimately accepted less than 1,000. In late 1929, the Ministry of Labour closed down the programme. Once more, Labour were in power, this time with Bondfield as Minister of Labour, and she persuaded her Cabinet colleagues that the centres for both men and women should be turned over to training for the home labour market for the time being, so that they could "again be available for oversea training when the demand for trained men for the Dominions revives"¹⁴.

Effectively, direct government involvement had come to an end. Although the OSD continued to grant aid a number of private and voluntary training centres, particularly those dealing with young people, levels of migration remained low throughout the 1930s (see Figure). Training policy was still firmly locked into supply side measures, but redirected towards reconditioning and mobility for domestic labour markets.

Colonising bodies, embodied learning

Racial characteristics and skills alone were not enough to ensure migration. Dominions governments wanted white British and Irish bodies that were normal and fit. Applicants for assisted passages were subjected to medical examination before they could set sail. The Canadian government in 1926 established its own Canadian Medical Service in Britain to examine prospective settlers¹⁵. By 1928, it had 28 full-time doctors, and employed British doctors part-time to cover the more remote areas. Medical examiners were instructed to report individuals who had spent time in a sanatorium, showed any “sign of disease of the Genito-Urinary Organs”, or suffered from mental illness. They tested sight, hearing, skin, digestive organs, heart, lungs, teeth and general physique, and weighed them. Applicants had to report any physical defects, insanity, epilepsy or tuberculosis, suffered in their family¹⁶.

Training regimes were simple. The Ministry of Labour reported that most of new arrivals “had not done any steady work for some time and they were often under-nourished”¹⁷. As well as work, the centres offered a protein-rich diet. They also covered a basic agricultural curriculum, supervised by instructors from Britain and the Dominions, using tools produced in the Dominions. By 1928, when the course lasted twelve weeks, the curriculum started with light work, until the men were fit enough for a programme of (a) tree felling, ground clearing, fencing and light carpentry; (b) dairy work, including milking and butter-making; (c) handling horses and ploughing; and (d) general farming operations. There were evening classes in basic literacy and on life and conditions in Canada and Australia¹⁸. Finally, the training centres offered the Dominions governments “a means of eliminating the unfit”¹⁹.

Government centres lacked any broader education or moralistic dimension, but voluntary organisations combined bodily training with moral instruction. In 1924, Bramwell Booth appealed for recruits to Hadleigh. The training, said Booth, surrounds lads with “influences tending to inspire them with a love for manliness, clean living, and all things of good report”, all of which would make young Highlanders without prospects at home an attractive proposition in the Dominions (*Inverness Courier*, 7 October 1924). Colonial physical standards cut right across the aims and ambitions of voluntary societies who saw themselves as helping the poor. Dr Cossar complained to several British and Dominions governments about “my difficulty in getting boys from the poorer parts away because of the standard of physique required”²⁰.

This role, though, should not be exaggerated. Most British emigrants received little or no preparation. G F Plant, secretary of the OSC, calculated that between 1922 and 1934, of all those assisted under the Empire Settlement Act, those who had been tested or trained in the UK amounted to 15% of boys, 0.8% single men, 2.3% single women and 0.2% families, at an average cost “per unit of £8, £18, £11 and £31 respectively” (Plant 1951, 146).

Silences of the past

Training programmes allowed the Dominions governments and the UK to reach an uneasy compromise. Dominions governments had no interest in helping paupers and unemployed miners; UK governments did not want to send settlers who had skills and capital. Testing and training, whether in a labour colony or Instructional Centre, suited both parties. While transference policy might be controversial politically, particularly among the more radical socialists and nationalists, the principles and practice of training attracted little political comment.

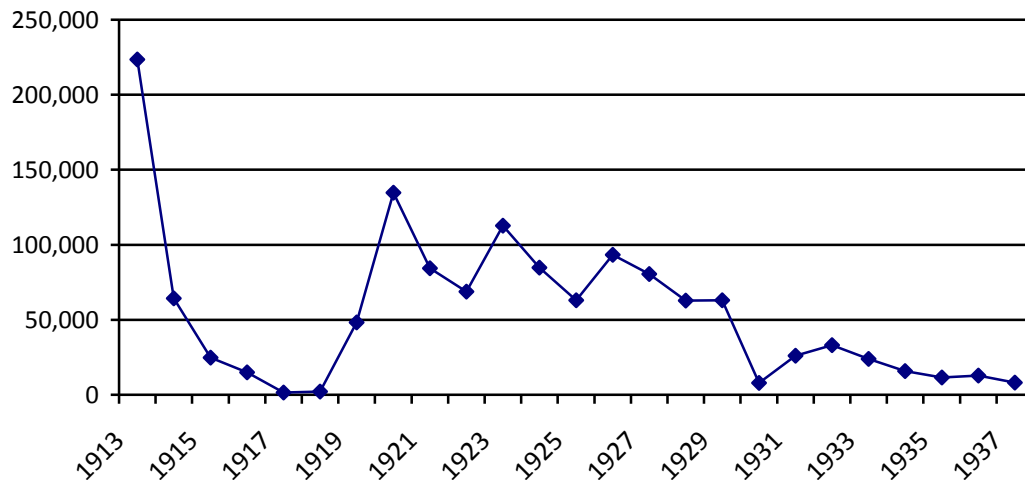
As David Lamb of the Salvation Army pointed out in 1925, voluntary organisations took the political sting out of state sponsored emigration. In Britain, it allowed governments to promote emigration without explicitly advocating it; in the Dominions, it meant that the dominant agencies were largely unscathed by the political controversies that immigration provoked (Langfield 2004, 100). What best explains the intervention of government during the mid-1920s was the bullish approach taken by the Ministry of Labour and its training department to the emergence of long term, concentrated unemployment at the top of the political agenda.

The experiences of the migrants themselves went largely unrecorded. While some later and younger migrants have told their stories, their accounts have largely played out in the contemporary metropolitan agora, and reflect their capacity to mobilise around contemporary politico-cultural concerns, in Britain as well as in the settler states. Those whose lives were spent at the margins of power have left no such narratives, whether of sorrow or joy.

Nevertheless, this episode tells us something about the history of British settlers in the Dominions. First, it underlines the diversity of British emigration. As well as those who brought skills and capital, and settled seamlessly into societies that still largely regarded and described themselves as British, the Dominions imported many thousands of unskilled and propertyless people. These men and women, boys and girls, were systematically screened and selected, placed and directed, and constantly reminded of their inferior and dependent status. Training regimes developed, initially within the voluntary sector, as a way of helping people get through the sifting process, and to give them at least some rudimentary assets within the labour markets of Canada and Australia. Subsequent involvement by the state was confined largely to single young adults, but with the added policy goal of ridding Britain of an unwanted surplus.

The training of working class emigrants has largely been neglected by historians. Yet this episode sheds light on a number of facets of educational policy and practice, whose consequences continue to cause controversy today. It raises important issues of social class and the disposability of the poor; of gender and the working body; of nationality and “belonging” to an imagined community; and of race as a strategic policy focus. It provokes ethical and moral questions of memory, responsibility, blame, which are highly relevant to the use of life history and oral history methods. Finally, it illuminates a forgotten episode in the development of adult education as a field of practice in the UK – part of the past that we might prefer not to reclaim.

Net emigration from Britain to other parts of the
Empire (Oversea Settlement Board 1938, p. 7)



Overseas training in Government Instructional Centres			
	Number of centres	Number entering training	Number completing
1925	1	200	0
1926	2	565	514
1927	2	715	621
1928	12	2,388	2,066
1929	13	5,292	4,456
1930	6	915	1,138
Source: Ministry of Labour, <i>Annual Reports</i>			

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¹ *Parliamentary Debates*, 28 May 1924

² *Sheffield Daily Independent*, 17 February 1926

³ *Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour (ARMoL)*, 1925, London, His Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), 1926, 117

⁴ Lt Col C MacNaghten to Peters, 13 January 1920, National Archives LAB2/1260/TDS8183

⁵ *ARMoL*, 1927, London, HMSO, 1928, 93

⁶ ITB, *Report*, London, HMSO, 1928, 18

⁷ ITB, *Report*, London, HMSO, 1928, 35-7

⁸ *ARMoL*, 1928, London, HMSO, 1929, 34

⁹ Note by J A Barlow, Ministry of Labour, 22 August 1928, NA LAB2/1236/EDO574

¹⁰ Barlow to Eady, 30 November 1927; Passmore, handwritten note, no date, NA LAB2/1237/EDO700

¹¹ F Crutchley, OSD, to Eady, 9 December 1927, H Heady, MoL, to J E Elliott, CES, 11 April 1928, NA LAB2/1237/EDO700

¹² Col. O'Kelly, Canada Building, to Passmore, 31 Dec 1925, NA LAB/2/1279/ET425

¹³ Eady to Barlow, 27 July 1927, Draft agreement between Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs and Hudons Bay Company Overseas Settlement Ltd, 1927, NA LAB/2/1279/ET425

¹⁴ *ARMoL*, 1930, London, HMSO, 1931, 32

¹⁵ *Imperial Conference, 1926. Appendices to the summary of proceedings*, London, HMSO, 1927, p. 271

¹⁶ *ITB, Report*, pp. 60-6

¹⁷ *ARMoL, 1929*, London, HMSO, 1930, 38

¹⁸ *ARMoL, 1928*, HMSO, 1929, 33-4

¹⁹ *ARMoL, 1927*, HMSO, 1928, 93

²⁰ G C Cossar to Hon Wm Adamson, Secretary of State for Scotland, 26 March 1930, National Archives of Scotland AF51/174